

19. The Discovery

The next day I noticed that I was quite distracted by Ella's troubles. Do you want to know how I noticed? It wasn't that I forgot to go to work, oh no. I forgot to change before going to work and almost walked up to Mr Stone's desk in a long dress and hoopskirt, announcing myself as "Mr Linton".

That would have been a real scandal for Mr Ambrose to worry about!

I noticed my wrong attire just in time and had to hurry back and change in a wild frenzy. By the time I had run back to Empire House, it was already nine o'clock. I hurried up the stairs and into my office, only giving Mr Stone a brief nod in passing. My desperate lungs lacked the air for a proper greeting. Wheezing, I collapsed onto my chair and let my head fall onto the table.

Just then, a message container flew out of the tube with a quiet 'plink'. With the one hand I felt capable of moving I picked it up, opened it and unrolled the message. My eyes focused on the words:

Mr Linton

You are 1 Minute and 37 Seconds late. If that occurs again, you can consider yourself dismissed.

Rikkard Ambrose

This chap really knew how to give you a warm welcome. For a moment I considered telling him about my sister's romantic troubles to make an excuse. But then I decided against it. It would be like trying to explain dancing the polka to a rock in the desert. He just wouldn't get it.

Next I considered going over there and skinning him alive. But that might not be so great an idea either. First of all, it might get me sacked. Secondly, I couldn't muster the energy to get up. And thirdly, the blasted door was still locked anyway!

A 'plink' announced the arrival of the next message.

It appeared that I had to get up, whether I had the energy or not! The message read:

Mr Linton,

Fetch file S39XX300

Rikkard Ambrose.

Spilling! Simply Spilling! Here we go again. Rising, I started towards the rows of shelves. But then I hesitated.

Wait just a moment... file S39XX300?

I frowned. The numbering systems for the files didn't start with letters, did it? It always started with numbers proclaiming the years of the file's origin. The 39 in the name probably stood for 1839, this very year, but 'S'? What did that stand for? Snoop? Saucy? Silly?

I went looking under 39, because I didn't know what else to do. Ten minutes later, I had three open boxes standing before me and a volcano rumbling somewhere inside me.

Dear Mr Ambrose

There is no file S39XX300. I cannot find it.

Yours sincerely

Miss Lilly Linton

The reply came immediately.

Mr Linton,

There IS a file S39XX300 Have you looked in the safe?

Rikkard Ambrose.

What the heck?

Dearest Mr Ambrose,

I did not know there was a safe here. Might I inquire why you neglected to tell me this?

Yours always

Miss Lilly Linton

Angrily I shoved the message into the tube and waited. Only half a minute later, a 'plink' announced the answer.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Mr Linton,

You Might indeed enquire. It is because I expect my employees be capable of independent thought. The 'S' stands for safe. If that is too difficult for you to comprehend, then maybe you should look for another post. One more fitted to your limited intellectual capabilities.

Rikkard Ambrose

The arrogant.... "limited intellectual capabilities"? Gah! I didn't even know what names to call him! The newspaper articles about women's insufficient brain size and all the other arguments against our working and voting came to mind. Oh how I would have loved to skin that man alive. And then maybe roast him slowly over an open fire...

Dear Mr Ambrose,

I will go looking for the safe directly. Do not fear – even my limited mental capacity should be sufficient to find a big metal box.

Yours always (Which means you're not getting rid of me!)

Miss Lilly Linton

I stood up. I went looking. I found the safe. It took me only five minutes and then I was back at my desk – still without file S39XX300, for a very simple reason. Fuming, I grabbed a message slip from the bowl and scrawled four simple words on it.

The safe is locked!

Had he been waiting for me to write that? Because the reply came almost instantly.

Mr Linton,

It is locked to keep things safe. That is why it is called a safe.

Rikkard Ambrose

Gah! Was this man trying to drive me crazy? Well... probably. To hell with him!

Dear Mr Ambrose,

I know it what a safe is, thank you very much. And I know it is locked, because I have tried to open it and not succeed, as mentioned before. WHERE IS THE KEY?

Yours Sincerely

Miss Lilly Linton

I pushed the message into the tube with maybe a bit more force than necessary and pulled the lever. His answer came as quick as ever.

Mr Linton,

Writing in capitals is not as quick or efficient as writing in normal letters. Please refrain from such time-wasting habits while in my employ. The key I have already pushed under the door, as any observant employee would have noticed.

Rikkard Ambrose

Muttering some not very polite things about Mr Ambrose, I went over to the door and fetched the key. Then I returned to the back of the room where, in a small niche I hadn't noticed before today, a big, black metal door had been inserted into the wall, with the word 'Ambrose' written in simple steel letters at the top. I wondered for a moment why he would feel the need to write his name on his own safe. Did he have that bad a memory? Then I realized that it was probably the name of the manufacturer. So he made safes, did he? What else did he do?

Pushing the thought aside and the key into the lock, I turned it and opened the door. It went smoothly and without even squeaking. Sleek and impenetrable, just like its maker.

I had expected maybe a metal container of maybe about three square feet to lie beyond. Instead I found myself facing the gloom of an enormous steel room, larger than my office, with scores of objects on the shelves which lined the walls.

There was everything, from the mundane file box to strange rocks, painted wooden idols and large scrolls of parchment that looked as though they had already lived through several centuries. What the hell were these? If Mr Ambrose was an industrialist, as the duchess had suggested, where had he gotten these from? They didn't look like anything coming out of a factory.

On the contrary—they spoke of distance, danger, mystery.

Resisting my mighty urge to go and investigate, I turned towards the file boxes and examined their numbers, one by one. There was an S39XX299 and an S39XX301 – but no S39XX300. What was he playing at? Did he do that on purpose?

I marched back to my desk and composed a fitting message. I even managed not to put any swear words in.

Dear Mr Ambrose,

There is no box S39XX300.

Yours Sincerely

Miss Lilly Linton

The message container returned. Pulling it open, I read:

Mr Linton,

I told you to look in the safe.

Rikkard Ambrose

This was getting to be a bit too much!

Dear Mr Ambrose,

I did look in the safe. It is not there. If you cannot understand my written messages, I would offer you to read my lips. But unfortunately that is not possible since the door to your office is still locked. So let me say it in plain English once again: There is no box S39XX300 in the safe.

Yours Sincerely

Lilly Linton

When his reply came, the letters were a bit different. Not a hasty scrawl, no – they were as clear and legible as always. But one could be lead to think that he had pressed the pen slightly harder on the paper as he scratched those words. Wait... He had the gall to be getting angry? He?

Mr Linton,

If by this subterfuge you think you can make me open my door so you can air your grievances, you are very much mistaken. Bring me file box S39XX300 or you can consider yourself dismissed.

Rikkard Ambrose

The thunderclouds of my temper began to gather, reading those words. But simultaneously, I felt a tingling sensation run down my spine. This box seemed to be pretty important – and it wasn't where it was supposed to be. What was going on?

Led by this strange feeling, my reply to Mr Ambrose was considerably more conciliatory than it ordinarily would have been.

Dear Mr Ambrose,

Whatever you may think of my intelligence, it is not so slight as to risk my future merely to get a look at your profile. You are not that nice-looking. The box in question is really not here.

Miss Lilly Linton

My heart rate picked up as I pushed the message container into the tube. Would he believe me, or just fire me? Did the box he wanted even exist, or was it just an excuse to get rid of me?

I looked around the bare room, and felt a lump rising in my throat. Although I didn't want to admit it, I had already become accustomed to the stark surroundings, accustomed to the idea that this place was mine, my own way to freedom. What would I do if I lost it?

Slowly I pulled the lever, and my message disappeared into the tube.

The answer came not long after. I opened and unrolled it – and my eyes widened. If the situation hadn't been so serious, the reply would have made me laugh!

Mr Linton,

Do you give me your word of honour as a gentleman- (crossed out) as a lady- (crossed out) as an honourable person that you are speaking the truth?

Rikkard Ambrose.

Somehow, I couldn't keep a slight grin from my face as I wrote the reply.

Dear Mr Ambrose,

I give you my word of honour as a lady who wears trousers that there is indeed no box of the aforementioned number/name in your safe.

Miss Lilly Linton

There was no reply. Nothing. For two entire minutes I sat there and waited, but nothing came. I had almost given up waiting and was chastising myself for my silly fancies. The box probably wasn't important at all. It was probably some old box he had mistakenly thrown away. That had to be all.

I had almost convinced myself of that explanation.

Then, I heard the rustle of keys from the other side of the room. My head snapped up just in time to see the connecting door to Mr Ambrose's office swing open.

My dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

Dress in your darkest mourning clothes and summon a Victorian marching band to march solemnly straight through the foggy streets of London! This is a time of mourning, because the chapter you've just read will be the last quickly posted chapter I shall be able to post for the time being. The terrible monster of University is about swallow me up once again, and I won't have nearly the same amount of free time to use for writing my stories as before. So unfortunately, I will be unable to continue posting chapters as quickly as during the last few weeks. Thus, this story shall once more resume its usual pace of about one installment per week. I hope you all liked this chapter. Pray keep your fingers crossed for me while I begin the perilous Odyssey through university life! :-)

On a more positive note, you'll soon have something extra special to look forward to: it is showdown time between Lilly & Mr Ambrose! Next week's update will be special.

Excited?? ;-)

Your Victorian scholar and scribbler,

Sir Rob